HODDER CHILDREN'S BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2023 by Hodder & Stoughton

First published in the United States in 2023 by Wednesday Books,
an imprint of St. Martin's Publishing Group

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 444 96464 6

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The paper and board used in this book are made from
wood from responsible sources.

MIX
Paper from
responsible sources
FSC
www.fsc.org
FSC® C104740

Hodder Children's Books
An imprint of Hachette Children's Group
Part of Hodder & Stoughton
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.hachettechildrens.co.uk

NEVER EVER GETTING BACK TOGETHER

SOPHIE GONZALES

To Sarah

ALSO BY SOPHIE GONZALES

Only Mostly Devastated

Perfect on Paper

WITH CALE DIETRICH

If This Gets Out

NEVER EVER GETTING BACK TOGETHER

SOPHIE GONZALES

Hodder Children's Books

ONE

Maya

The guy at the bar next to me is grinning at me intimately, as though he knows all my secrets but likes me anyway. It's a little unsettling, mostly because I'm damn sure I've never seen him before in my life, and I'm good with faces. It *is* the sort of grin that'd instantly win over anyone with the ability to trust a man with a charismatic smile, though. I'll give him that.

It's a pity I'm not one of those people.

But as it happens, I want something from him, so I shamelessly mirror his silken smile, and wait. "I'm trying to figure something out," he says as an icebreaker after a few seconds, raising his voice over the music. It's a bass-heavy remix of a pop song, played about a dozen decibels too loud.

"What might that be?" I glance at the bartender as I speak, but he's just started serving someone else. We're gonna be here awhile.

Good.

"Why is it, do you think, that someone decided all the best-tasting cocktails on a menu were girl-drinks? What even makes a drink a girl-drink or a guy-drink? It's a *drink*."

When movies and TV shows told me to brace myself for guys to ask me a flirty question at the bar, this wasn't exactly what

I expected. Although, that might be because those bars are usually at an exclusive club or obscenely expensive restaurant. Maybe when you're standing at a bar inside a quirky bowling alley where the balls are neon, the tables are decorated with newspaper clippings of various dogs, and the signature drink is served in a soup bowl, you have to expect things to veer off the beaten track. Pickup lines and all.

"Sexism, I guess?" I say with a shrug.

"Well, yeah, that's a given. But you know it wasn't a girl who made that rule, so, why'd guys screw ourselves over like this? Guys can drink coffee without weird looks, but I bet you *anything* that if I brought an espresso martini back to my table I'd get endless shit from my friends. *Endless,*" he repeats emphatically, slamming his fist on the bar. The bartender shoots him an annoyed glance, and he removes his hand abruptly.

A group of guys being dicks to one another about stupid shit is not exactly surprising. But I am a *little* lost as to why he's randomly decided to share this fact with me. "Who cares if you do? Is your masculinity that fragile?"

There's that dazzling grin again. "I know how bad this is gonna make me sound, but, yes. It is, unfortunately, and I'm working on that, but today isn't that day."

And, finally, it clicks. "Well, as it happens, I'm here with a whole table of girls who would be delighted for you to join them to drink an espresso martini in peace. No judgment included."

"Now *that,*" the guy says, "is an interesting proposition."

He says it like I've come up with some sort of genius idea out of the blue, and he *totally, definitely* didn't bring this up to try to steer us toward him buying me a drink. Seems like a shit-ton of trouble to go to when I would've said yes if he'd

just, you know, asked me if I wanted a drink, but here we are. Talk about taking the scenic route. "Okay, how about this," he goes on. "I get an espresso martini, and whatever you'd like to drink as a thank-you for your kind offer, then you introduce me to your table of nonjudgmental friends?"

I pretend to think about it while the bartender wraps up serving the other customer. Then, finally, I nod. "Sure, I'm down. Make it an espresso martini and a pink passion crush. Thanks."

Shortly after, both drinks in hand, the guy (who introduces himself as Andre) follows me back to my table. "Here, you can take yours now, if you want," he offers.

"Oh, it's not my drink," I say.

He slows his step as he steers around tables full of bowlers sipping pink liquid from soup bowls. "Who'd I just buy a drink for, then?"

"*You,*" I say, "just bought my sister a drink for her twentieth birthday. Very chivalrous of you. We're at that table over there."

We reach my sister, Rosie's, table—well, specifically, it's two tables pushed together to fit all nine of us—and Rosie gives me a look of impressed approval. *Piece of cake,* I mouth.

She's the one who spotted Andre sitting with his own friends a few lanes over from us while we were bowling. She was very dramatic about it, too, declaring to everyone within earshot that she'd commit a federal crime to get his number. After we'd finished our game, we'd come to the dining area for the *real* draw of the alley for Rosie—Instagrammable mocktails and flower-covered walls set up specifically for photo opportunities—and Andre and his friends had done the same, only they'd sat on the other side of the area.

So, obviously, when we noticed Andre head to the bar alone, the table decided someone needed to wing-woman, and, also obviously, I had to volunteer. I'm pretty sure it might be illegal in some states to refuse your sister a favor on her birthday. Or maybe that's a Mafia thing. Anyway, I figured as long as he was single and into girls, I'd surely be able to convince him to wish my beautiful, single sister a happy birthday. Mission accomplished. Sort of.

"Rosie." I slide into my seat beside her. "This is Andre. He bought you a birthday drink."

"That is *so nice,* thank you," Rosie says as the other girls at the table give him innocent, pleasant smiles of their own, like we totally didn't plan this.

My best friend, Olivia, beckons for him to sit. "Well, she can't drink alone on her birthday, can she?"

Andre looks between Rosie and me, before grabbing a chair from an empty table nearby and setting up next to Rosie. If he's surprised about sitting with Rosie instead of me, he definitely doesn't seem upset about it. And so he shouldn't be. As far as I'm concerned, he's won the lottery with Rosie.

"How do you *do* that?" Olivia asks quietly. "I could never."

I shrug. "I dunno. Can't be my stunning good looks, because you've got those in spades."

"*True*."

I return to my mango-lychee mocktail—which, thankfully, comes in a tall glass, and not a bowl. "I just talk to them. They're just guys, they're not intimidating."

"Only women intimidate you?" Olivia quips.

"Okay, you're joking, but literally. I could never just up and introduce myself to a beautiful girl. I'd die first."

"See, that's exactly how I feel with men."

Her smile fades at the end of her sentence, and her brow

knits as she looks at something above my head. I follow her gaze to the TV mounted on the wall behind me, above a pastel arch of crepe paper flowers.

The headline along the bottom reads: *Brother of Princess Samantha of Chalonne, Jordy Miller, Reads to Orphans; Provides Candy and Hope*. On the screen is Jordy Miller himself in front of an orphanage in Chalonne, receiving an enormous thank-you card from one of said orphans, his hand plastered over his chest like his heart's about to burst.

That goddamn motherfucker.

Some of the others look over as well, including Rosie and Andre. Andre is the first to react to our staring, happily swirling his martini. "I was friends with him when he lived here, you know," he says. His tone is more than a bit braggy. "I was one of his best friends."

"Really?" I ask, confused. "Did we ever meet?"

Like I said, I am *sure* I've never seen his face before, so I'm actually taken aback to hear this.

Now it's his turn to look puzzled. "Why would we have?"

"Um." Rosie laughs. "Because Maya dated him for, like, a year?"

Andre scans my face, like he's trying to place me. I'm pretty confident I know what's coming next.

Three, two . . .

"*Wait*. Wait, wait, wait. You're not the one who went all crazy when he moved, are you?"

One.

A few girls at the table boo him.

"Please, do not," Rosie says in a warning tone.

"We let you *sit with us,*" Olivia adds with a glower.

Andre looks between us all in confusion. "Okay, okay. Sounds like there's more to the story?"

I stare into my drink, counting the ice cubes and *really* fucking wishing all of a sudden I hadn't offered to wingwoman.

"He's a cheating asshole," Olivia says. "And if you call Maya crazy again, that martini's ending up on your head and you won't have time to stop me."

"*Jordy?*" Andre asks skeptically, holding his hands up. "Like, our Jordy Miller? Reads to children, gives to charity, invented feminism Jordy?"

Lots of ice cubes in this glass.

Olivia doesn't back down. "He was Maya's boyfriend, he moved to Canada, cheated on Maya for two *months,* then when Maya found out he broke up with her. Not sure what part of that is feminist. Or maybe you need to read up on the definition."

"No, that's fair. I mean, the story I heard was a little different. But I hear you. Sometimes this stuff gets twisted."

The thing is, he's saying the right things, but I can tell by his tone he doesn't believe it. See, I've noticed something about people over the last year or two. Even when they consider themselves rational, and fair, they usually believe the story they hear first. Ever heard the phrase "the best defense is a good offense"? This is a prime example. The person who gets their version of events out first is the one who gets to author the history books. Writing history is easy. Rewriting it is the tough job.

Unfortunately for me, Jordy made sure to get his version of events out before I even knew there was a race. In his version, Jordy tearfully broke up with me when he had to move countries, and told me he'd never forget me. Then, I somehow took that to mean we were still together, despite Jordy's *very clear* breakup speech. Shortly after, I sent my friend in Canada to stalk him, and then flew into a jealous rage when

she reported back that he'd moved on, accusing him of cheating on me for no reason.

It's a great story for Jordy. Sure does paint him in the world's most positive light. Da Vinci himself couldn't make a prettier picture.

Pity it's all bullshit.

Andre's friends must be wondering where he's gone off to by now, but he doesn't seem all that bothered about ditching them. Another pity.

Rosie, who doesn't look super thrilled to have him at the table anymore, notices my expression and takes it upon herself to change the subject. God fucking bless the girl. "So, did you go to Sigmund High, then?" she asks Andre.

As Andre replies, Olivia leans in to me. "Hey. You okay?"

I straighten and plaster a smile onto my face. "Mhm. I'm used to it."

Jordy's not on the TV anymore, but I can still see his face as he posed in front of the orphanage. Smiling at the presenter the way he used to smile at me. Like she's the most interesting person in the world.

God, that look used to make my heart feel like it was gonna burst clean out of my chest.

I wonder how many others feel like that when they see Jordy Miller smile at them from the TV. Or magazines. Or the posters on their walls.

How many of them see his shell and believe they know what's under those layers of charm? And what would they say if they found out?

Olivia gives me a skeptical look, and I'm about to insist I'm *really* okay in the kind of shrill tone that *totally* convinces people you're definitely not being defensive, when my phone rings. Saved by the bell. "Hold on, sorry," I say, bringing the phone to my ear. "Hello?"

"Hi, is this Maya Bailey?"

"Speaking."

"This eezgwendbushmeeford zhombareemaday—"

I get up. "Hold on, sorry, I can't hear you. Just let me go outside. Just . . . gonna . . . okay." I close the glass door behind me and flop on a bench in the parking lot. "Sorry, hi, who is this?"

"Gwendolyn Bushman, calling from Bushman and Siegal Productions. I'm reaching out because we have an exciting opportunity for you we think you'd love to be involved in."

I've never heard of this production company in my life, and I'm pretty sure this is a scam call. Any second now they're gonna ask for my credit card details, right?

"Sorry, where did you get my number?" I ask, hovering my finger over the "end call" button.

"From Jordy Miller."

If I weren't sitting down already, I would've dropped from shock. "*Jordy?*"

"Yes. Our team has produced some of the top-rated reality shows from the past few years. Are you familiar with *Nerds in the Jungle, Dating Without Caffeine,* and *Extreme Bathroom Makeovers*?"

"Who isn't?"

"All ours. We have an exciting new project coming up this year; a show called *Second-Chance Romance*. Each season will follow a leading suitor and their exes, as they re-date each other to see if any of that spark that made them fall hard the first time around is still there now that both parties have grown and matured. This year, we're thrilled to have Jordy signed on as our first-ever suitor!"

I take a second to process this. "Jordy Miller's gonna be on a reality show?" I ask finally.

"Yes. And, we hope, so will you?"

I look instinctively inside, where I can see the table full of my friends. I have a sudden, wild urge to sprint to them and demand they pile on top of me to bury me under their collective body weight and press out the *sheer rage* that's bubbling within me. "You want me to date Jordy Miller again? On TV?"

"Yes. The series will be filmed in Loreux, Chalonne, and you'll be accommodated in a *gorgeous* lakeside mansion, it's really something. All meals will, of course, be provided, and you'll receive a small amount of compensation for your participation—"

"Look, I don't know why Jordy put me forward," I interrupt her. "But I'm not interested, and he would know that."

"I know it can feel that way when a relationship doesn't work out. But the thing is, *something* drew the two of you together in the first place. When people grow, they usually change for the better. Chances are, he'll have retained that special something, but perhaps some of those differences that separated you will—"

"Let me be clear, Gwendolyn. I would rather be swallowed up into the bowels of hell and enter an arrangement with the fallen angel Lucifer than date Jordy Miller again."

Gwendolyn's pause of surprise stretches on long enough I almost laugh into the silence. "The fallen angel Lucifer is the devil," she says finally, like she thinks I made a small mistake there.

"Yes, Gwendolyn."

"You're telling me you would rather date Satan than Jordy?"

"I am telling you I would sooner go on a reality show with the prince of darkness himself, Gwendolyn, yes."

"That's a heck of a strong opinion."

"*Hell* of a strong opinion seems more accurate here."

I'm enjoying our banter, but Gwendolyn doesn't laugh. "How about I let you think on it?"

"I'd rather not."

"Can I have your email? I could send you through an information packet. It's quite wonderful, we made a little PowerPoint—"

"*Satan himself,* Gwendolyn."

"I'll put you down as a 'maybe.'"

"Please don't."

"It was wonderful to talk to you, Maya! I look forward to hopefully seeing a lot of you in beautiful Chalonne. Filming starts in two months, by the way."

"I literally could not care less, Gwendolyn."

She gives a trill of laughter. "Okay, take care."

"You, too, Gwendolyn."

I hang up, then spend the better part of five minutes staring into space, head empty.

Finally, a thought breaks through and screams bloody murder in the center of my brain.

I never wanted to have anything to do with him again.

It's a desperate thought, aching and furious and exhausted all at once. But I shove those emotions down because I am noping the hell out of this before it even gets started and therefore, I don't have to feel a thing.

Like hell I'm doing this. Absolutely not. Under no circumstances. Not if they pay me a million dollars.

Well, honestly, maybe for a million dollars. But Gwendolyn didn't say anything about a million dollars, and she would've probably brought that up if it'd been relevant, because god knows money would be a much more persuasive selling point than the promise of being romanced, screwed over, and gaslit by Jordy Miller.

Again.

So, calm and unaffected and totally casual, I head back inside, nonchalantly sit down next to Olivia, and smile like I

don't have a care in the world. Because I don't. I'm fine. I'm goddamn *fine*.

She takes one look at me and furrows her brow. "Babe? What's the matter?" she asks. "You look like you've seen a ghost."